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SIPDIS

SENSITIVE
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STANGER, OES/PCI--AARON SALZBERG, LYNETTE POULTON, ANN
STEWART, AND OES/ETC--ANTOINETTE CONDO
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TAGS: [SENV](#) [PGOV](#) [CB](#)
SUBJECT: SAVING CAMBODIA'S FRESHWATER DOLPHINS: NGOS AND
GOVERNMENT UNITED IN COMMITMENT, SEPARATED BY APPROACH

PHNOM PENH 00000160 001.2 OF 003

1. (SBU) SUMMARY. A 120-mile stretch of the Mekong River in northern Cambodia is home to the world's largest group of Irrawaddy dolphins, a critically endangered freshwater species. The dolphins, which are a significant tourist draw in a little-visited corner of the country, have been dying in high numbers in recent years and could be extinct within a decade. The National Dolphin Commission, a group created in February 2006 by Prime Minister Hun Sen, is making a serious effort to protect the species, including instituting a ban on environmentally damaging fishing nets. However, NGOs criticize the commission's heavy-handedness, emphasis on enforcement rather than profit-sharing and alternative livelihood development, environmentally harmful tourism development plans, and vulnerability to corruption. END SUMMARY.

Cambodia Home to Rare Dolphins

2. (U) While the Irrawaddy dolphin is found in small numbers in Burma, Indonesia, and Thailand, the population of 80-100 individuals in Cambodia's Mekong River is the world's largest surviving group. The dolphins, which are classified as critically endangered, are concentrated in a series of deep pools in the river between the town of Kratie and the Lao border. As recently as the 1970s there were an estimated 2,000 to 5,000 dolphins in Cambodia's Mekong. However, the dolphins declined quickly during Cambodia's upheaval as the Khmer Rouge slaughtered dolphins to harvest oil and Vietnamese troops reportedly used the dolphins for target practice. In addition to the dolphins, Cambodia's Mekong is home to other endangered species, including freshwater crocodiles, the giant Mekong barb, the giant Mekong catfish, and the seven line barb, which would likely benefit from sound conservation efforts.

Mysterious Deaths Threaten Endangered Species

3. (U) In the past few years, mortality rates for the dolphins have risen dramatically, to at least 16-20% since 2003, far above the 1-2% rate scientists suggest is consistent with species survival. Initially, the majority of the deaths were among adults, and illegal fishing practices, such as such as electric shock, poison, explosives (especially grenades), and the use of mosquito nets or gillnets (fishing nets hundreds of meters long which are

stretched across the river and left in place for weeks or months at a time), were singled out as the culprit. For the past three years, however, the number of dying infants has eclipsed the number of dying adults. Dr. Verne Dove, an Australian veterinarian working with the Cambodia Mekong Dolphin Conservation Project, estimates that just a few babies have survived in each of the preceding years--a situation that could easily be setting the scene for localized or worldwide extinction within a decade. However, the cause of death of these infants is unclear. Red lesions on the necks of many dead calves suggest that a disease may be to blame. Laboratory tests have ruled out mercury poisoning from local gold mines, but results of histological and organic pollutant analysis are pending.

Government Emphasizes Enforcement, Tourism Development...

14. (SBU) Following the dramatic deaths of 14 dolphins--including 12 calves--in January and February 2006, Prime Minister Hun Sen established the National Dolphin Commission and appointed Dr. Touch Seng Tana as its director. Dr. Tana sees gillnets as the main culprit behind the deaths of adult and infant dolphins alike, and has charged 64 recently hired river guards with enforcing a ban on their use. Although the ban originally applied only to six core zones, which correspond roughly to the deep pools where the dolphins congregate, there is now confusion about whether the ban has been extended to cover a 120-mile-long area from Kampi to the Laos border. While Dr. Tana explained that this "total ban" would only be enforced in some areas, it was clear from Poleconoff interviews with river guards and government officials that this had not been communicated to the field. The total ban has provoked local fears about livelihoods with 90 people in two affected villages signing a petition in protest.

PHNOM PENH 00000160 002.2 OF 003

15. (SBU) The second part of the government's plan for dealing with the dolphins is to aggressively promote dolphin tourism. In 2006, approximately 7,000 foreign and 35,000 Cambodian tourists came to visit the dolphins at the most popular viewing location, Kampi, located 15km north of the provincial capital, Kratie. Tana hopes to create a major tourist park there, including an interpretive center, performances by trained dolphins (non-endangered species) in a tank, opportunities to feed and swim with the endangered dolphins in the Mekong River, 24-hour karaoke, and 400 hotel rooms. Tana also proposes dredging the Mekong south of Kampi and building a river port to accommodate ships filled with Vietnamese tourists. To make space for this tourist park, Tana has asked Kampi villagers--90% of whom make their living from fishing--to move from their riverfront homes to a proposed inland road ringing the tourist development site. He reports that while the villagers were very reluctant to move at first, after considerable pressure they have "almost agreed." Dr. Tana told Poleconoff that he does not foresee any adverse environmental consequences from these plans.

...But NGOs Raise Red Flags

16. (SBU) Staff at the two NGOs working most closely with the dolphins, the Cambodia Rural Development Team (CRDT) and World Wildlife Fund (WWF), are deeply skeptical of Dr. Tana's plans. Adam Starr, CRDT Management Advisor, warned, "I fear the complete extinction of the Mekong Irrawaddy dolphin due to mismanagement, not because of the government but because of one man (Tana)." Richard Zanre, WWF Dolphin Project Manager, described Tana as "dedicated and single-minded" in his pursuit to save the dolphins, but also very suspicious of foreigners and NGOs--a claim given credence by Tana's boast to Poleconoff that he had used "spyware" to bug the house of a Isabel Beasley, a now-departed Australian doctoral student researching the dolphins.

17. (SBU) Starr and Zanre do not share Tana's conviction that gillnets are behind nearly all the dolphin deaths, and strongly support more research to determine the cause of the dramatic increase in infant deaths. More critically, they oppose Tana's ambitious tourism scheme as environmentally disastrous and detrimental to the local communities. In preparation for the development of the tourist park, NGOs operating in Kampi--including CRDT and WWF--were told to suspend their work there, ending not only community education efforts, but also alternative livelihood projects designed to reduce fishing in the over-fished Mekong.

18. (SBU) At the same time, proceeds from admissions to the Kampi viewing area, which were once split--40% to the community via the village development committee, 30% to the provincial fishery department, and 30% to the provincial tourism department--now go entirely to the National Dolphin Commission, eliminating a powerful financial incentive for villagers to protect the dolphins. To add a total gillnet fishing ban to this mix, in an area where 90% of villagers make their living from fishing, is simply too harsh, they say. Proposals to dredge portions of the river and allow tourists to feed or swim with little-studied rare dolphins could be environmentally disastrous. Zanre and Starr are enthusiastic about an effort by the World Bank and the Dutch aid agency SNV to develop a sustainable ecotourism plan for northeast Cambodia, which would include the development of a "dolphin trail" where tourists could bike along the Mekong stopping at various viewing locations.

19. (SBU) Corruption--an endemic problem in Cambodia--also concerns Starr and Zanre. The river guard system is ripe for payoffs and bribes, they assert. While many river guard units have excellent reputations, a few have developed reputations for corrupt behavior, including accepting bribes to ignore illegal behavior and using seized illegal fishing equipment for their own fishing in restricted areas. Moreover, they believe that the motive behind the proposed Kampi tourist park is unclear: Is this really an attempt to build a facility that will contribute to local economic development, or is it an opportunity for sweetheart deals that will enrich the well-connected investors?

Comment

PHNOM PENH 00000160 003.3 OF 003

110. (SBU) The disagreements and significant distrust between NGOs and the National Dolphin Commission on dolphin conservation policy are unfortunate and hinder conservation efforts. Nonetheless, the fact remains that both the government and the NGOs are taking the dolphin decline seriously and are moving quickly to address the issue. While NGOs raise valid concerns about the lack of community participation in decisionmaking and profit-sharing and the potential for corruption, some of their hopes are unrealistic or out of step with the Cambodian context. Expat NGO staff may prefer cycling tours and low-key tourism to 24-hour karaoke entertainment and trained dolphin shows, but for a site that draws many more Asian tourists than Western sightseers, the government's plans may be more appropriate. Concerned NGOs should focus their efforts on guiding the government away from the most damaging of their plans--such as river dredging and dolphin swims--and promoting transparency and community engagement in any land sales, but may need to accept that sweetheart deals on prime hotel real estate are a lamentable but nearly unavoidable part of the process in a country well-known for corruption.

111. (SBU) Unfortunately, efforts to determine what is behind the mysterious deaths have been hampered by a number of factors. Isabel Beasley, an Australian PhD student who spent many years researching the dolphins and cooperating with NGO conservation efforts, had a falling out with National Dolphin

Commission Director Dr. Touch Seng Tana and left the country, taking all of her research with her. She has so far been unwilling to share the preliminary results of her work, and Dr. Dove and others feel their only option for gleaning information from her work is to wait until she publishes academic articles or her dissertation. The relative decline in deaths in the past few months has actually hampered research efforts as there are fewer dead dolphins for analysis. Additionally, the lab space at CMDCP headquarters has limited equipment and specimens must be sent abroad for testing. In a sign of the on-going tension between expat NGO teams and the National Dolphin Commission, Dr. Tana has challenged the legality of researchers shipping tissue or blood samples overseas for analysis, arguing that because they come from an endangered species, the researchers must apply for permission to export the samples.

¶12. (U) As for the success of the government's gillnet ban and other conservation efforts, the next few weeks will be critical. Dolphin mortalities, and particularly infant mortalities, have typically peaked from November to March. If the government is able to show a significant decrease in deaths during the first peak season since the National Dolphin Commission was created, their approach will gain credibility. END COMMENT.
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